

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY HISTORY OF INDEPENDENCE

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On December 15, 1826, five years after the admission of Missouri into the Union, the organization of Jackson County was authorized by the Missouri General Assembly. Three commissioners were appointed to select a place for the county seat. They chose a centrally-located 160-acre tract three miles south of the Missouri River which they called "Independence." The new Jackson County Court soon approved the site in the spring of 1827, and the sale of town lots began in July of the same year.

As the county seat, Independence began to grow into an important economic center for western Missouri. Its proximity to the Missouri River, which served as the county's northern border before its great bend northward, allowed the town to receive supplies from the river boats via wagon trains. Overland commerce from St. Louis passed through Independence as well and continued on to the west and southwest. The small Missouri town was a natural commercial center for the growing trade with Mexico. As early as 1827, Independence was the westernmost U.S. settlement for the beginning of the Santa Fe Trail.

In the winter of 1830-31, five elders of the Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints arrived in the tiny settlement to convert the Indians living to the immediate west of Missouri. In the summer of 1831, church founder Joseph Smith, Jr., arrived in Independence where he revealed to his followers that Jackson County was the "Promised Land" or new headquarters for the faith. He called Independence, the "City of Zion." Smith's followers, commonly referred to as Mormons, soon began to pour into Independence to establish their own religious community. Mainly from New York and Ohio, the Mormons antagonized many of the townspeople. Many saw the influx of the religious zealots as a threat to their own interests. The Mormon belief that Jackson County represented a promised land given by God distressed the early settlers. Anti-Mormon residents initiated a campaign to drive the Mormons out of Independence and Jackson County. In November 1833, Joseph Smith and his Mormon Church were violently expelled.

During this time of turmoil, Independence merchants were reaping the benefits of being in the center of the outfitting business for fur traders and the mule- and ox-drawn wagon trains bound for Santa Fe. In the 1840s, the town outfitted immigrant groups bound for Oregon. A wide array of basic supplies and luxury goods flowed into Independence. In May 1846, historian Francis Parkman observed:

Being at leisure one day I rode over to Independence. The Town was crowded. A multitude of shops had sprung up to furnish the emigrants and Santa Fe traders with necessities for their journey; and there was an incessant hammering and banging from a dozen blacksmiths' sheds, where the heavy wagons were being repaired, and the horses and oxen shod. The streets were thronged with men, horses, and mules.¹

Independence and Jackson County were economically dependent on the westward migration. By 1848, most of the 12,000 settlers living in Oregon had begun their journey in Independence. Upon the discovery of gold in California, many of the prospectors of the 1849 gold rush also swept through Independence. The small town was the starting place of the three principal trails of the 19th century American westward movement--Santa Fe, Oregon, and California.

On March 8, 1849, the Missouri General Assembly granted Independence a home-rule charter. On July 18, 1849, William McCoy was elected the town's first mayor. Even before McCoy took office, the decline of Independence loomed. Other settlements on the western border of the county, Westport Landing and Wayne City Landing (both later incorporated into Kansas City) ended Independence's trade monopoly.

The issue of slavery and the Civil War combined to decimate Independence. Culturally and politically, the town

was Southern. Missouri's admission to the Union as a slave state saw many counties in the central section of the state split into North-South factions, and Jackson County was no exception. When the national political balance between slave and non-slave states was upset with the 1854 passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the peace in Jackson County was broken. The law provided that the citizens of these new territories themselves would decide the issue of becoming a free or slaveholding state. The subsequent "Border War" which erupted between Missouri and the Kansas territory in 1855 involved bloody clashes in Jackson County. In a prelude to the Civil War, Kansas Jayhawkers (pro-Federal) and Southern guerillas led by William C. Quantrill and others began a series of brutal raids across the state line. The pillaging and terrorism caused the Independence outfitting trade irreparable harm. It all but collapsed as the Civil War began in 1861.

Missouri did not follow her sister slave states and secede from the Union. In Jackson County, Kansas City was confidently pro-Union while Independence was solidly pro-South. To keep the county under Union control, Independence was made a Federal post on June 7, 1862. On August 11, 1862, Confederate troops and guerillas invaded the town and drove the Union soldiers out. The Southern sympathizers who supported Quantrill's guerillas were punished on August 25, 1863, when U.S. Brigadier

General Thomas A. Ewing issued the infamous Order Number 11. The military directive punished innocent and guilty alike. It demanded that all inhabitants of Jackson, Cass, Bates, and part of Vernon counties in Missouri leave their homes within 15 days. Rural residents who swore allegiance to the United States were settled in Federal areas of control. Those who refused were driven out. Federal troops then burned the abandoned properties and crops to ensure that rebel sympathizers did not use them to aid the guerillas.

When Jackson Countians were allowed to return to their homes, most found only charred remains. The area around Independence was so barren that it was commonly called "the Burnt District." The second Battle of Independence in October 1864 caused further destruction when the town was ravaged for two days. The defeat of Confederate forces in the Battle of Westport (October 23, 1864) effectively ended the war in the trans-Mississippi west region.

The emotional scars of the Civil War took generations to heal. Economically and politically, Independence never fully recovered. The pre-war boom was gone forever. It was Kansas City that emerged as the county's new crossroads where the railroads and new industries located. Real political power and control shifted to the west, although Independence remained the

de jure county seat. The post-war renaissance nevertheless saw Independence residents determined to rebuild and promote their town.²

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¹Bernd Foerster, Independence, Missouri (Independence, Mo.: Independence Press, 1978), p. 16.

²The majority of this section was taken in passim from the above-cited source.